

# Researching the Effects of Frame-Focused Instruction on Second Language Acquisition

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In the context of globalization, the research of innovative teaching methods and techniques becomes relevant. The traditional teaching approach where the training of practice material is preceded by rule-presentation (explanation + mechanical form-oriented practice) does not meet the requirements of constantly developing rational language processing. Contemporary studies are considering the ways how to allow second language learners to be rational in the sense that their mental models of language functioning are the most optimal. This paper outlines current ideas of second language acquisition from cognitive perspective. Language learning involves the acquisition of frame instructions or input-processing instructions (explanation + structured-input activities). Competence and performance both emerge from the dynamic system of frequently used memorized constructions. Frames are dynamic contextualized activation of stereotyped situations. This system proves to be rational, since it aims at optimal reflection of prior first language usage and helping learners to think consciously about some sort of rules in order to work out the meaning. The frame-based instruction consists of activities which present learners with a stimulus and require them to respond choosing the appropriate language form for communication. The targeted feature of such communicative tasks has two aims: (1) to stimulate communicative language use; and (2) to target the use of a particular predetermined linguistic feature. The empirical research shows that frame-focused tasks guide learners' attention to the meaning which is realized by the target form. Methodological basis includes some theoretical propositions from recent relevance theory and cognitive linguistics.

*Keywords:* frame, relevance, conceptual, proposition, interpretation, selection

## Introduction

It is generally accepted that motivation plays a vital role in academic learning which is particularly true in the process of mastering a second language. The motivation for second language acquisition has been conceptualized as a construct that comprises a number of more general and more situation-specific components that guide learning behavior. One of the main components is instruction which predetermines successful educational process. The purpose of this article is to set out a framework for conducting innovative studies that investigate the effects of instruction on second language acquisition. The framework will examine constructs related to three key areas of this research domain: (1) the type of instruction; (2) the target of instruction; and (3) the measurement of "language acquisition".

### **Types of Instructions and Their Target Features**

There are two known instructional conditions: (1) explicit (traditional rule explanation); and (2) implicit (remembering situations). The last one involves a so-called rule-search condition, inductive rule-discovery tasks and practice activities based on both fluency and analysis tasks. Innovation approaches in mastering foreign languages are mainly based on meaning-centered and identifying rules tasks, when a student is involved in cognitive process of analyzing the communicative situations and formulating rules instead of mechanically memorizing them. Ellis (2002) distinguished three broad types of instruction based on: (1) Whether the primary focus of it was on form or meaning; and (2) How the instruction was distributed (whether it aimed at intensive attention to a single form or extensive attention to a variety of different forms). Traditional instruction is directed solely at formal accuracy by means of traditional and controlled exercises where the focus is on the formal elements of the language, while innovation instruction is directed at establishing form-meaning mappings, where attention is drawn to the linguistic apparatus needed to get the meaning across. It is crucially important to distinguish the context in which attention to form (for example grammatical) takes place. It makes the learners clear that the essential purpose of the activities they are engaging in is to focus on the processing (use) of some specific linguistic features (for example, common/continuous forms in English).

Speaking about target features of different types of instructions, it should be mentioned that traditional instructions are explicit which means deductive (the target feature is explained to the learners) and innovative instructions are inductive (the learners are instructed to infer rules for themselves). The latter should provide learners with input data containing the target structure without any awareness of what the target structure is. For example, the teacher can flood learners with input containing situations in context with durative and non-durative (common) grammatical forms. The task is to work out their meanings. What is more important, it is not preceded by rule-presentation but directs learner's conscious attention to the target feature in the practice. Further, we will give the example of such innovative task based on frames as stereotyped communicative situations.

### **Frames as Input Processing Innovative Instructions**

Faced with a choice of a linguistic form to express an idea, the speaker subconsciously takes a broad context (scenario or frame) into account, against which the selected language expression will be interpreted. Thus, it is possible to define frame not only statically as a fixed framework or scheme, but also dynamically as the combination of pragmatic features modeling this situation.

Frame can be referred to focused (communicative) tasks that aimed at inducing processing of some specific linguistic features in production and illustrated by scenarios represented according to the following structure, which can be possibly applied to any communicative situation:

#### **Frame: The Search for Umbrella**

Martin looked round the hall, rather shabby and sad in daylight.

I wonder, did I leave my umbrella here? I put it over there, I think, or maybe not, I was sitting near the back, I...  
It cannot have been stolen, though.  
I was not suggesting it had... (Modern English Stories, 1985).

## (1) Frame structure.

(a) Setting: hall

(b) Functions: X: guest Martin

Y: host

(c) Properties: Perhaps, X is tired and cannot remember where he put his umbrella, he is not sure whether it was stolen or not.

(d) Position: Y is helping X.

## (2) Frame conventions

(a) If X does not remember the events of the previous day, his statements cannot sound categorical;

(b) If X had agreed with Y that his umbrella could not have been stolen, he would have used "common" to describe the situation and confirm his confidence, however, he is confused;

(c) The choice of the durative form in this context may be explained by X's uncertainty, doubt.

Thus, we can assume that the choice of grammatical form is determined by the speaker's uncertainty and his correlation of the described situation with the reality/unreality (his inferior or semi-conscious state). The access to this assumption is provided, in its turn, by the grammatical form of the utterance.

**Frame: Lawyers' Conversation**

"How are we going to deal with our client's confusing account of what the photographs were doing in his brief case?" (Kay & Fillmore, 1999).

## (1) Frame structure:

(a) Functions: X: advocate-speaker/interpreter

Y: lawyer

(b) Properties: The photographs, mentioned in the speech, did not have to be found in the suspect's brief case. X asks for Y's advice of how to make the jury believe that there was nothing extraordinary about this fact.

## (2) Frame conventions:

(a) If X and Y had no intention of hiding the incongruity of the fact that if the photographs were in the brief case, it would not be necessary to discuss it;

(b) If X induces Y to discuss this problem and he considers this state of affairs incongruous;

(c) For the description of usual situation, X will use "common".

Thus, incongruity of the situation described is derived from this scenario.

**Frame: Scene in the Hall**

When Baines was urging, hoping, entreating and commanding, the girl looked at the tea and the China pots and cried (Modern English Short Stories, 1978, p. 59).

## (1) Frame structure:

(a) Functions: X—Baines

Y—girl

Z—observer

(b) Properties: X tries to influence Y, though his attempts are vain. Perhaps, Y is very upset, so she remains indifferent to all X's efforts.

## (2) Frame conventions:

(a) If X finds difficulty in influencing Y, then he would be trying to achieve result;

(b) If “common” form were used, X’s actions could have been perceived as single and successive, but this is in contradiction with frame convention 1. Z sees how unsuccessfully X tries to exert influence on Y.

The observer and his/her point of view influence the choice of grammatical forms. He/she tries to express all fuss made by X with the help of simultaneous actions perceived as ongoing process. The usage of “common” would have made the described situation ambiguous.

The choice of grammatical form is predetermined here by background knowledge (the speaker only implies this incongruity by using “progressive”) and reference (he/she correlates the described situation with the proper state of affairs in the search for relevance). Thus, the task is to work out certain rules and conditions under which the speaker or the writer should use durative (progressive) form. Second language acquisition is better in this case, because frames involve learners into communication itself, assisting them to answer the question “Why do I chose this form in this particular situation?” by themselves without applying to boring grammar rules in textbooks.

Thus, the target feature of a frame is to invite learners to communicate about language and to stimulate communication and grammatical sensitivity.

### Experimental Data: Measurement of Language Acquisition

As shown in Table 1, the efficiency of the frame was supported by the experiment with 129 second-year university learners with intermediate-level of English as a second language. The two groups were tested parallelly. The result showed that one group had higher academic score than the other group did. However, the experiment at the beginning revealed the low level of all respondents’ knowledge of the English grammar (Sokolova, 2008). Both groups were educated under different instructional conditions: (1) explicit (rule explanation); and (2) implicit (exposure only). The first group was provided with traditional instruction (mechanical form-oriented practice) and the other one with input-processing instructions based on frames (structured-input activities). After five months, a control experiment was held. The procedure was as follows: The students were required to pass a written test which included the choice of the tense and aspect forms in the English discourse. Moreover, they were suggested to substantiate their choice. The average score was figured according to the following criteria: the language competence in choosing the right verb form in a given situation, and the ability to give reasons for the choice (see Table 2).

Table 1

#### *Experimental Conditions*

Participant	Instructional treatment	Target structure	Testing instrument
129 second-year university learners of the second language	Two instructional conditions: (1) traditional instruction (explanation + mechanical form-oriented practice); (2) input-processing instruction (explanation + structured-input activities)	Progressive and Common grammatical forms	(1) Preference tasks; (2) Written production tests

Thus, the majority of the students of the control group failed to produce the right choice. What is more, when they were asked to express the given idea in English, the results proved to be in favor of teaching by frames. The students of the control group had evident difficulty in formulating their ideas. They used graphic signs (arrows) to show dependent and applied transliteration when they failed to find a suitable word, while

some honestly confessed that this task was too difficult for them.

Table 2

*Experimental Results*

The task	The average test score (%)	
	1st group (control) (max-100%)	2nd group (experimental) (max-100%)
1. Aspect choice	60	93.3
2. Tense choice	23	87
3. Explanation	3.7	74.3
Number of respondents	64	65

The fact is that a frame can form a mental structure (a framework and a proposition) in the head of a student. So, it facilitates his/her ability to create sentences or even text fragments in the foreign language. He/she can make grammar mistakes, but their ability to express himself/herself is doubtless.

We suggest that the number of frames, which presuppose the language means choice, can be unlimited. Frame can be interpreted as a system of choices of different linguistic forms, which is based on the speaker's interpretive perception of the observed situation. At the final advanced stage, a student can be encouraged to build his/her own frames, while working with lexical, grammatical and even audio material in English. The usage of elements of cognitive linguistics while teaching foreign language especially at the advanced level should be used in one way or another, since it is sure to contribute to the students' better understanding of the mechanism of the selection of language means, which is significant for the competent language speaker. What is more, frame approach not only contributes to extending the students' knowledge at the advanced level but also is helpful while working with those students who did not make satisfactory progresses. The reason is that frame develops the ability to build mental logical chains of concepts which allow the student to express himself, even if he does it at the primitive level. So, teaching through situations helps to reveal the cognitive environment of the native speakers.

As the innovative instructions, frame is a consciousness-raising task which constitutes a device for assisting learners to develop explicit knowledge of a specific feature. It also serves as a device for stimulating communication with language as a topic.

We also hope that the proposed method of grammatical description will eventually lead to the development of the complex research methodology and be capable of providing an account of the formal concept of interdependency of parameters, which characterize the components of the structures with grammatical forms as well as pragmatic factors which are involved in the process of language means selection and reflect the result of natural processing of linguistic and non-linguistic data in the process of discourse production and interpretation.

## Conclusions

The aim of the given article has been to attempt to outline the strategies that the researchers need to investigate three important areas of methodology related to form-focused instructions: the type of instruction itself, the target structure and the measurement of acquisition.

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